

# Three recent rabies cases prompt new warnings

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August 10, 2010 12:00 am • By Independent Record

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Three recent incidents of exposures to bats in Gallatin, Teton and Flathead counties have prompted health officials to remind people of the dangers of rabies and the importance of vaccinating pets.

According to the state Department of Livestock, two people are undergoing post-exposure treatment — a series of shots — after being exposed to bats. Steve Merritt, a DOL spokesman, said they weren't bitten or scratched, but were close to the bats.

In addition to the human exposure, an unvaccinated cat in that house is under a 180-day quarantine. In a second case, an unvaccinated dog that was possibly exposed to rabies via a bat also is quarantined. In another case, an unvaccinated cat was euthanized.

## Related Links

- Montana Department of Livestock
- Montana Department of Public Health & Human Services
- USDA-APHIS Wildlife Services
- Centers for Disease Control
- American Veterinary Medical Association
- Compendium of Animal Rabies Prevention & Control

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State veterinarian Dr. Marty Zaluski said it's unfortunate that the animals are being quarantined or euthanized. He noted that pets are curious about wildlife, but that the danger of exposure to rabies can be lessened with the vaccine.

Pet vaccinations also are a cheaper alternative to the quarantine, he added, since many pets are required to be boarded in an approved facility, when exposed, or even possibly exposed, to rabies. Boarding rates can range from \$5 to \$20 per day, so a 180-day quarantine can cost more than \$1,000.

Since there isn't a cure for infected animals, if they show signs of rabies they must be euthanized.

"The potential consequences make vaccinations a good investment from both a human and animal health perspective," Zaluski said.

Rabies is a deadly viral disease, spread through the saliva, bites or scratches from an infected animal, and causes swelling of the brain in mammals, including humans. Rabies is almost always fatal unless treated before symptoms appear, but remains a rare event in humans, causing only one or two deaths per year nationwide, according to the Centers for Disease Control. However, rabies kills more than 55,000 people worldwide each year, mainly in Asia and Africa.

Bats and skunks are the most common carriers of the disease in Montana.

"Bats, and other common carriers of the disease like skunks, are more active in the summer and are thus more likely to be encountered by humans or pets," he said. "It's the time of year when pet and livestock owners need to be vigilant and take proper precautions."

When attempting to capture or collect a bat for testing, Zaluski said, the first priority is making sure people are not exposed to the disease. Wear heavy, puncture-resistant gloves when collecting a bat or any other animal suspected of having the disease, and double-bag the sample. People observing a bat or other animal suspected of having rabies can also call local animal control officers.

He warned the public to try not to damage the animal's head, since the brain is used for testing for rabies.

"We like to have samples so we can identify any risk that may exist for both humans and animals," Zaluski said. "But the first priority, always, is protecting yourself."

Abnormal behavior is the most consistent sign of the disease. Rabies usually manifests itself in two forms, called dumb or furious. With the dumb form, animals become shy or hide, and are often unapproachable. They also may act sluggish, depressed or confused.

With the furious form, animals are excitable, irritable and aggressive, and may attack suddenly when approached. Other signs of rabies include drooling; inability to eat, drink or swallow; frothing

at the mouth; and staggering, weakness, convulsions and paralysis. Animals will normally become comatose prior to death.

"Unusual behavior, such as poor motor skills (staggering, walking in circles, etc.), being out in daylight hours and showing no fear of humans, are classic signs of the disease and should always send up a red flag," Zaluski said.

Anyone who is bitten or scratched by an animal should thoroughly wash the wound with soap and water and seek medical attention for the wound. Animal bites should be reported to the county health department, or county sheriff's office after hours, as soon as possible.

Rabies is a mandatory reportable disease in Montana, and all suspected cases must be immediately reported to the state veterinarian at 444-2043.

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